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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 000534

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SUBJECT: LEBANON: PM: GHAJAR WITHDRAWAL WOULD SHOW THAT
DIPLOMACY WORKS

REF: BEIRUT 485

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

1. (C) In a May 9 meeting with NEA Deputy Assistant Secretary of State David Hale, Lebanese Prime Minister Fouad Siniora expressed the need for March 14's leaders to come together in the run-up to the June 7 parliamentary elections. Siniora added that the release of the four generals would not have a big impact for either side in the elections, but Israel's return of Ghajar could help, as it would demonstrate that moderates could achieve results through diplomacy as opposed to violence.

2. (C) Siniora stated his support for the Obama Administration's outreach to Syria and Iran, as isolation only strengthened such regimes. However, Siniora cautioned against reaching out too quickly. Siniora told DAS Hale that the U.S. should involve others such as the EU and Russia in the administration's efforts towards Palestinian-Israeli peace. Siniora added that recent comments from the Obama Administration signaling that USG policy towards Lebanon will not change as we engage with others were a good sign, and he repeated his usual statement that Lebanon should be at the bargaining table, not on it. End Summary.

MARCH 14 MUST WORK
TOGETHER TO WIN ELECTIONS

3. (C) Visiting NEA DAS David Hale, accompanied by Ambassador, DCM, and Poloff, met with PM Siniora and his advisor Roula Nouredine at his office in the Grand Serail on May 9. A relaxed Siniora, who has been campaigning on weekends for an MP seat in his home city of Sidon, opened by saying that success in the upcoming June 7 parliamentary elections depends on March 14's ability to work together as a unified coalition. This message needs to be repeated daily to March 14 leaders, Amine Gemayel (Kataeb), Samir Geagea (Lebanese Forces), and Walid Jumblatt (Progressive Socialist

Party), Siniora urged. Otherwise, March 14 will suffer defeat in the elections. (Note: Siniora specifically cited as a problem the Lebanese Forces naming a U.S.-based Armenian dentist to run for one of the Armenian seats in Beirut district I, even though the Armenians in this district do not support this candidate. End Note.) Regarding his own candidacy in the election, Siniora said he had not intended to run for parliament, but the thought of the opposition winning a seat in Sidon convinced him to throw his hat in the ring.

RELEASE OF FOUR GENERALS

14. (C) Siniora said the Special Tribunal's decision to release the four generals had less of a negative impact than he originally believed (reftel), adding that those who are with us are still with us and those who are against us still oppose us. He noted that their release did not prove the generals were innocent, and that their behavior and statements to the media since their release have brought back the ghosts of the past.

IRAN

15. (C) Regarding USG policy towards Iran, Siniora worried that Iran's rhetoric portraying itself as the defender of Islam and its continued "hijacking" of the Palestinian issue boosted the Iranian regime's credentials and increased its regional influence. However, Siniora supported the idea of

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dialogue with Iran because isolation only helps prop-up such regimes. However, Siniora also urged the USG to be firm with Iran in this dialogue, especially over Iran's desire to acquire nuclear weapons. A solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict would also take from Iran one of its hijacked causes.

16. (C) Nouredine asked DAS Hale if the Iran issue superseded the issue of Palestinian-Israeli peace. DAS Hale responded that during Middle East Special Envoy George Mitchell's recent travel to twelve Arab countries, the priority expressed by Arab leaders has been how to deal with the Iranian threat. For them, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is only a sub-set of the Iranian problem, DAS Hale added, but an urgent one. There was every reason to pursue an agenda with Iran and work for Arab-Israeli peace simultaneously.

SYRIA

17. (C) Siniora said Syria's regional priorities were clear. Syrian leaders want to defend the regime, have influence vis-a-vis Lebanon and the withdrawal of Israeli forces from the Golan Heights. Siniora encouraged U.S. discussions with Syria, adding that U.S. engagement with Syria would curb Iran's increasing influence in the region. However, he cautioned the U.S. to approach its engagement with Syria without making any "advanced payment." DAS Hale replied that the U.S. administration shared that view and is sincere in engaging other countries. This new tactic of engagement would put U.S. enemies on the defensive.

18. (C) Nouredine asked about Syria's efforts to give itself a role vis-a-vis Hamas. DAS Hale responded that in USG discussions with Syrian officials, the regime claimed variously to have no influence over Hamas, or that Hamas, as a political entity was free to adopt its chosen positions. He added that the USG has responded to such claims from Syria by saying that it would be difficult to support a Syrian-Israeli track if Syria was undercutting the Palestinian-Israeli track and supporting terrorist organization such as Hizballah and Hamas. DAS Hale added

that the U.S. would not sacrifice Palestinian-Israeli efforts for Syrian-Israeli peace negotiations, just as the U.S. would not make any deals with Syria at the expense of Lebanon's sovereignty and independence.

ARAB-ISRAELI PEACE

¶9. (C) Turning to the issue of Arab-Israeli peace, Siniora reiterated his belief that such a peace would reduce the influence of extremists and increase that of moderates in the region. Siniora urged the U.S. to involve the EU and the Russians in its Middle East peace efforts and urged the U.S. to explain the risks of a lack of Israeli-Palestinian peace to the EU and Russia, which borders a number of Muslim countries. Siniora reiterated that the lack of progress on this issue only strengthened the view of extremists in the region and weakened moderates. Middle East Special Envoy George Mitchell's visits to the region should be coupled with positive actions from the Israelis, he added.

¶10. (C) In response, DAS Hale said the U.S. has been working with the EU and Arab countries on this issue. Russia has also been helpful. DAS Hale downplayed recent rumors that the Arab Peace Initiative (API) would be amended, saying that API was not a treaty, but a set of principles. DAS Hale added that the API was a good foundation on which to build Arab-Israeli peace and that the U.S. would be active in supporting this proposal. What we were looking for at this stage were Arab gestures in the context of Israeli steps which, together, could create a climate conducive to peace

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negotiations.

GHAJAR

¶11. (C) Siniora said the Israeli return of Ghajar is an important issue because it would demonstrate that diplomacy works, and that force is not the answer. The PM noted that he had to distance himself from recent Israeli press articles stating that Israel would return Ghajar to Lebanon before the elections to give a boost to the Siniora government so that his opponents could not claim he has Israeli support. He added that Israeli fears that the withdrawal would be portrayed as a victory for Hizballah were ironic, because Israel had already delivered a victory to Hizballah by returning some of the groups fighters directly to Hizballah, instead of the GOL, in July 2008.

POSSIBLE GEORGE MITCHELL VISIT?

¶12. (C) In a discussion of a possible visit by Special Envoy for Middle East Peace George Mitchell, Siniora said the topic of Palestinian refugees should be on the agenda, specifically the issue of avoiding permanent resettlement of the refugees in Lebanon (referred to as "tawteen" in Arabic). Siniora urged Mitchell to visit President Sleiman, Parliament Speaker Berri, and the new PM during a visit.

¶13. (U) DAS Hale has cleared this cable.
SISON